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ABSTRACT

An observer can identify a trend in television news presentation style toward the dramatic, not only in the sets and the personnel, but more importantly in the choice of what is deemed newsworthy. A thesis is proposed by many suggesting that television is a regular ritual of many viewers of which news is a minor part and that television's first mission is not to inform or even to entertain, but to move goods. Ultimately then, the reason for drama on the news is that it attracts audiences for advertisers. Also, information programing is now cheaper to produce than most entertainment programing and is becoming more profitable every year. International criticism of this trend in the United States is based on concerns that two-thirds of the world's daily output of news comes directly or indirectly from New York: is ethnocentric: overemphasizes celebrities, the bizarre, and disasters: and ignores developmental journalism. There is also concern that because the U. S. media do not give a realistic view of the world by favoring the dramatic, the U. S. public has often been caught unaware by international developments. (MKM)

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TELEVISION NEWS AS DRAMA: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Television News as Drama: An International Perspective

Robert Lewis Shayon has shown in his study of "Television International,"[1] how the rest of the non-communist world seems to emulate the American model of broadcasting. If this is the case, it is useful to look at the American scene, not just for its own sake, but because of its seemingly inevitable worldwide impact. Also, by contrasting the differences between the foreign and the U. S. practices, it is possible to understand the American scene better.

The Current Scene.

The current television news scene in the United States is a lively one indeed. One need go no further than Time magazine's cover story on the "eight million dollar man", Dan Rather, to wonder whether show business values have taken over the last bastion of commercialized (yet relatively staid) news reporting--CBS. A pithy quotation summed up the situation:

> The management of CBS and CBS News has made its decision on Walter Cronkite's successor, according to its current values and standards. From the beginning I have regarded myself as a news reporter, not as a newsmaker or a celebrity.[2]

The quotation was from CBS newsman, Roger Mudd, who, in the contest to replace Walter Cronkite, was the loser. Ironically, the comment was not unlike Rather's own thoughts on the show business aura and salary which accompanied Barbara Walter's switch to ABC just a few years previously.[3]

The temper of the times was against Mudd's candidacy for two reasons, style and economics. The last decade has seen the influence of "Happy Talk" news from ABC to the other networks. Despite the virulent reaction, an observer today can identify changes in news presentation style throught the industry--not only in the sets and the personnel, but more importantly in the choice of what is newsworthy, and the length of those stories. Patterns of presentation emerged for all to see, for example, in the last months of Cronkite's tenure at CBS, the concluding stories were very often upbeat human interest vignettes.

Gerbner and Signorelli point out that underlying most television news research is the assumption that television is similar to other media, but this assumption is false "because television is viewed non-selectively and many (if not the majority) of the most ardent viewers are also heavy viewers of television drama." In brief: "Television is a regular ritual of which news is a minor part."[4]

News As Drama.

With this perspective, it is worthwhile examining the writings of William Bluem who studied the theatrical aspects of factual programming and the interface between journalism and drama.[5] This study is particularly interesting to anyone attempting to explain current trends. Bluem's contribution was, in fact, a thoughtful synthesis of dramaturgical history and a survey of journalistic imperatives. He noted that the theatrical impulse, from the time of the Greeks until today, has been to render life-made-real on the stage and he concluded that television is the current culmination of this documentary quest.

Bluem examined the work of the nineteenth century journalist-dramatist-theorist Emile Zola and his Naturalisme theory. He compared Zola's deterministic stance with the current fashion of realism which has many of the qualities of naturalism, but which is not so deterministic as to exclude the exertion of the human will which, Bluem claimed, was the single most important element of drama.

Bluem dissected many hybrid forms of documentary-drama such as "The Living Newspaper," a federally-funded and Newspaper Guild sponsored experiment in New York in the 1930's which faced many of the philosophical problems of television factual programming twenty years before television became such an important social force. He also considered the importance of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Realism, a style in which the playwright created characters so real that they compelled audience empathy. Brecht, however, deliberately alienated the audience at the height of the dramatic tension by reminding them that the play was only a play, and that the social forces in their real world environment should be their overriding concern. (This seems to be the converse of one of the problems faced by television news today).

Similarly, insights provided by the examination of the Italian neo-realist movement and the small intimate crises of the early days of television drama are detailed by Bluem in an attempt to describe the peculiar aesthetic of television which John Grierson called "a creature of domestic comfort."[6] Bluem claimed that the Italian neo-realism movement went a long way in debunking the conventional melodramatic presentation of the cinema of the period, and that the concept of villainy projected by this genre became less personalized and more a product of social forces. Almost contemporaneously, the "Golden Age"

of television drama established the "art-of-the-small-crisis" as the natural expression of the effect of the electronic box in the living room, which did not demand any effort to be sought out, but which rather became an integral part of domestic routine and habit if not an actual addiction. Thus the "Golden Age" produced a formula which became a successful model for television drama.

News as Happy Talk.

It is on this point of drama that one can quote Marshall McLuhan, who, in his essay on "Sharing The News," compared television news with the clear-cut package of print news:

> By contrast, the drama of TV faces directly encountering the public demands a sensitive response to events. The "friendly teamness" broadcaster shares the news with his audience instead of passing it on as an impersonal package.[7]

Thus McLuhan, in this ABC-sponsored booklet, provided a manifesto for the "Happy Talk" ABC style news where the light-hearted personality shared the news with the viewer. If McLuhan wrote the manifesto, the acknowledged chronicler of the Happy Talk phenomenon is Ron Powers, who in his book The Newscasters takes as negative a stance toward Happy Talk news as McLuhan is positive. Powers describes the beginning of Happy Talk at WLS in Chicago in 1968, describes how Tom Snyder does "journalism as show biz,"[8] explains the role of the news consultants, and rails against the "self-consciousness, the preening, the ingratiation and the bonhommie" of the newscasters.[9] Powers doesn't see the news presented as drama but rather as vaudeville.

He described television news American Style:

> New is, at best, an unnatural function of television. Far from being conceived as in instrument of dissent or as a critical watch-dog of government, as were newspapers, American TV owes its very livelihood to the status quo. Licensed by the federal government, it hardly dares to be insurrectionary. Financed and controlled by the country's most powerful conglomerates, with a mandate to reward advertisers, it hardly dares to risk alientating its audiences with bad tidings.

Television's first mission is not to inform. It is not even to entertain. It is to move goods, to round up viewers for the main event--the commerical.[10]

The Alternatives.

Clearly, Powers' assessment notwithstanding, on an international basis, the American style TV news is the most lively, and in McLuhan's terminology, least print oriented.

> It is probably the print and book bias of the BBC and the CBC that renders them so awkward and inhibited in radio and TV presentation. Commercial urgency, rather than artistic insight, fostered by contrast a hectic vivacity in the corresponding American operation.[11]

Going to the other extreme, one need only consider the procedural and psychological barriers, quite apart from the obvious political barriers, which confront the Soviet newsgathering apparatus in its attempts to acquire speed and comprehensiveness in presenting the news. While the Russians in news gathering practice, are, by our standards, extremely slow and cautious, the concern for the impact of

the story, must here also, at some level, become the editor's responsibility. For example, in the American system Robert Murphy has asked these questions in the context of the live telecast over KNXT in Los Angeles in 1974 when four hundred police surrounded the house where the members of the so-called Symbinonese Liberation Army met their deaths in a fiery shoot-out. As Murphy said: "The drama was intensified because it was suspected that fugitive heiress Patricia Hearst was inside."[12] Thus while the celebrity protagonist completed the requirements for conventional drama on television, the news director found his control in shaping the story abruptly truncated by the live format. Furthermore, with the development of ENG reporting the problems facing the television news director increase. They include the potential for broadcasting false information and rumor; of being "used" to create an event simply by telecasting it live; of exaggerating story in the excitement of live coverage; and of giving simplistic accounts of complicated occurrences.

By contrast, Maury Lisann quotes, in a case study of why Russian correspondents refused to cover a natural disaster in which thousands of houses had collapsed, an alternative rationale: "One should not make an unhealthy sensation out of an earthquake." Dissenting correspondents who set out around the city to gather a story were met with the question from officials and Party workers: "Why inflame passions?"[13] It is easy to see how the supporters of the "New World Information Order" are in agreement with many of the traditions of the Russian system, whether they be labelled "social responsibility" or "totalitarian," and shy away from the Western predeliction for the arresting and the dramatic as the

determinants of newsworthiness.

While much of the third world complaints about western news concern the sheer volume of the traffic, for example Sean Macbride makes a point of stressing that two-thirds of the world's daily output of news comes directly or indirectly from New York, and that two-thirds of the world's major news agencies' correspondents are posted in North America and Europe, there are several other important factors to be considered.[14] Critics such as Mustapha Masmoudi's objections to Western news on the cultural level may be listed.[15] It is ethnocentric--it doesn't understand foreign cultures.[16] It is biassed in the sense that stories or "scripts" must be made to fit the concepts in the minds of the editors back home, perhaps not in the gross sense in which Henry Luce rewrote Teddy White's dispatches from China, but in a very real sense nonetheless. It overemphasizes the bizarre. It creates celebrities and their doings. It overemphasizes disasters, natural and man-made. It ignores developmental journalism such as covering the new dam in Nigeria which might be of vital interest to the third world country, but is of no perceived interest to the Western audience. In short, the values of the western news are largely the value of drama.

American TV Newstyle Spread Worldwide.

Ultimately, the reason for drama on the news is that it attracts audiences for advertisers, so it is important to take into consideration the recent economic history of television news. As Edward R. Murrow

so eloquently put it to the RNTDA meeting in 1958, American television was an uneasy amalgam of business, journalism and show business.[17] After Murrow's death, his colleague Fred Friendly documented the predominance of busines values over broadcast news values when he was unable as CBS News head to show the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Vietnam over the celebrated fourteenth rerun of I Love Lucy.[18]

The economic picture, however, has changed since the sixties. At that time, when the network spokesperson claimed that they "lost money" on news it often meant that they did not make as much money as they would have if they had run an entertainment program in the news slot. Today, that part of the equation is no longer true. Information programming is cheaper to produce than most entertainment programming, and is becoming more profitable every year. Furthermore, looking to the future, with subscription TV and cartridge TV increasing in importance, broadcast television looks to what it can do best as its strength. It is generally accepted that what it does best is live programming--sports and news.

The productional style of the newscast has also changed recently to generate more excitement. For example, initial late night network news offering, the ABC's fifteen minute program "American Held Hostage: The Iran Crisis", use the latest in digital electronic effects--push

ons, push off, flip overs and soft wipes in its presentational style. Its replacement Nightline continued the style and added pulsating musical bridges. Whether this is gimmickry or a legitimate use of video grammar may be left to the aesthetes, but it is unlikely to be a passing fad.

In fact, this injection of theatrical excitment into the news has long been the American innovation. Scholars may see the similarity with the "new" approach and the "old" approach of the newsreel, or what today we might call the mini-documentary, March of Time. If one takes a print of a March of Time segment of the mid-thirties, for example, "Arms and the League," from the Museum of Modern Art, its presentation and formula are readily available for all to see. The booming "voice of God" narration replete with theatrical excitement and the musical accompaniment are only the obvious correlates of the initial premise of Timestyle reporting. Luce and Hadden, Time magazine's originators, were dependent on the dramatic theories of Edgar Allan Poe in the way they presented their "news"--initially obtained second hand by rewriting stories from the New York Times.[19] Today this dramatic structure of a beginning, middle and end, with a rising plane of interest, a climax and a denoument, all focussed on a personalized protagonist, is as familiar as Time itself.[20] While the anchorman often fulfills the requirement of the cover personality for TV, that is as a protagonist to focus the audience's empathy, the dramatic structuring of the telecasts

is as formulaic as the magazine's. To see the international impact of this mode of presentation it is necessary to take it out of context and place it, for example, in direct contrast to the practically anonymous newsreader presenting copy and visuals prepared by a team of anonymous journalists--the style which served the BBC for many years. Here the interest and excitement are generated by the content, and the clarity and perspicacity of the presentation. All of these considerations lead, of course, to a question of the philosophy of news, and not merely to a question of style.

This philosophy of news is being discussed in at least one overseas country, Australia, which has both the BBC tradition of news presentation exemplified by the national non-commercial network, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, as well as the American commercialized news tradition represented by the commercial television stations. In Australia, in 1979, a prestigious weekly, The National Times, reported that a survey submitted to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (the governing body for commercial broadcasting) claimed that Sydney commercial stations placed the emphasis on entertainment rather than information when selecting the news.[21] The submission argued that the short time devoted to foreign news and coverage of "events" rather than "trends" meant that the populace couldn't possibly evaluate what was happening overseas, a line of argument which is not unknown in the United States.[22] By way of illustration, when the stories included President Carter talks on oil policy, a U.S. race car smash, a Jerusalem story, a story from Iran, and the Canadian seal hunt, the commercial stations

select for broadcast the car smash and the seal hunt. While the ABC follows the BBC practice of formal presentation of serious news, the commercial stations Channel 10 in Sydney, when it replied to the submission, claimed that the ABC's "talking head" concept of news presentation was totally rejected, and that channel 10's method of presentation was to tell the stories with pictures which were "worth many words."

It must be noted, however, that the non-commercial ABC, which resists change in that today it still has half-hour uninterrupted nationwide news programs on radio, must accommodate itself to a world shaped by the news agencies and commercial news values. TV stories coming into Australia via satellite since 1975 have come from Visnews in London which transmits eight to ten stories a day and, since 1980, from UPITN in the U.S. which sends a similar amount. An American viewer sampling ABC-TV news in January, 1979, might, for example, find the sole American satellited story to cover the random shooting of elementary school children by a deranged teenager in San Diego. How much the story may or may not be representative of the doings in the U.S. that day might be open to debate, but no one could fault the teenager's logical pursuit of her goal. The reason she gave for the shooting was that she, "wanted to be on television."

The Critics.

Perhaps one of the most cogent summaries of Third World critiques of Western-style news can be found in Rosemary Righter's Whose News? Politics, the Press and the Third World. She puts one of the arguments

as an allusion to the tabloid in Evelyn Waugh's satiric novel Black Mischief:

> News is selected in accordance with what will sell more of the Daily Beast, sensation abounds and reporting reflects the public taste for entertainment and the habits of the "bad news syndrome."[23]

While the Daily Beast was a fictionalized British newspaper in the thirties, it shares with American television today the need to inject dramatic excitement into the news to increase the audience and hence the advertising dollars. By way of contrast, those organizations with no commercial motivation are rarely accused of cheap sensationalism. In fact, PBS' McNeil-Lehrer Report and NPR's programs are very much in the BBC's non-commercial style, and while they are relatively recent arrivals on the American broadcast scene, the commercialized style of broadcasting has aggressively expanded into the formerly non-commercialized British arena and gained huge audiences.[24] Richard Bunce claims that it is inherent in the nature of American-style commercial broadcasting to attempt to expand world-wide in order to serve the mercantile interests of the transnational corporations.[25] In his view, American-style television is merely the harbinger of American-style corporate influence in the life of nations. If this is the case, then the style of the world's news is dependent on the fortunes of American business abroad.

A Typology of Theories of News.

To get other opinions on the factors affecting television news content, it is worthwhile considering Michael Robinson's typology of theories of news selection.[26] They include:

1. Epstein's theory of television news based on organizational behavior, or "organizational process," where the needs of the corporate organizations, the networks, determine what is considered news.[27]

2. The "newsworthy" model where working journalists use their judgement (or conditioning) to select what is newsworthy.

3. The reality interpretation model which holds that network news is merely the mirror reflection of the most important events of the day.

4. The collage interpretation model which regards news as a melange comprised of a little politics, a little disaster, a little hoopla, and a dash of human interest.

5. The attitudinal-political model which holds that news is collected and shaped to fit with the socio-political perspective of those who provide it. Regarding this category he states: "Polemical books, like Efron's The News Twisters or Cirino's Don't Blame the People,[28, 29] have saddled this interpretation with a bad press."[30]

To Robinson's categories may be added Herbert Gans' ideas that news is a product of social class determinism. Because editors, producers and reporters are upper middle class in background, status, professional values and interpersonal relations, and so are their regular sources, social class homogeneity is reflected in story development.[31]

A variation of Gans' theories can be found in Sophia Peterson's conclusions from her study of foreign news gatekeepers in that cultural differences affect news selection. She claims that much of the debate of Western versus Third World news selection which is often couched in terms of press freedom, may rather be explained by cultural differences.[32]

Perhaps each of these theories may, in the language of social science, explain part of the variance, but do any of the theories explain as much as the theory of "the dramatic thrust" of television news? One writer who espouses the dramatic thrust theory is Barry Rubin.[33] According to Rubin, the U.S. media do not give a reasonable realistic view of the world because of the favoring of the dramatic over the realistic.

The result of this, according to Rubin, is that the U.S. public has often been caught unawares by developments. Taking the international scene alone, the U.S. has been caught unawares by the Ethiopia-Somalia battle; China's political upheavals; the collapse of the Portuguese empire in Southern Africa; the spread of terrorism; and by the increasing distaste for the USA felt by some Third World countries.[34] The seriousness of the consequences of this way of thinking, is put in a much broader context by Anthony Marc Lewis, who writes about the "blind spot" of U.S. foreign intelligence.[35]

Whatever the social scientists can contribute, it is often the artistic humanist who has the most insightful view of any cultural phenomena. One whimsical anaylsis of the CBS characters (or "stars"), Captain Kangaroo and Walter Cronkite, concluded they were the same

man.[36] CBS had created a juvenile dependence on a private delusion in the morning, and an adult dependence on a mass illusion in the evening. It must be admitted that this concept poses tantalizing vistas for the student of mythical analysis, of audience viewing habits and motivation, and most especially, of the dramatic structure of the TV news show.

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